

Quarry Concerns Some Canyon Tenants

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More than a century ago, Mormon settlers carted granite slabs 20 miles from Little Cottonwood Canyon to build a splendid temple. Now the LDS Church wants to reactivate the quarry to mine matching rock for its new assembly building.

The 11,400 tons of granite would be hauled by truck -- not oxen -- cutting the four-day journey to Salt Lake City to under an hour. But a new age also presents new challenges.

For starters, Brigham Young did not have to comply with a hillside-protection ordinance. Nor did he have to worry about wildlife, noise pollution and erosion. And the leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints certainly did not have to appease the likes of Karen Cunningham.

She is one of four furious homeowners living directly below the church-owned rock pile. When Cunningham's neighbor fires up the snowblower, her walls vibrate. She can only imagine what explosives will do.

"This canyon is so pristine that they wouldn't let the Olympics up here," says Cunningham. "Then they consider something like this."

Salt Lake County planners are evaluating the church's proposal to ensure it conforms to new canyon zoning laws. Mining extraction is permitted as a conditional use under the protective ordinances, as long as certain environmental concerns are addressed. For example, road building is restricted on steep slopes and the area must be rehabilitated.

It is not known how the granite will be used in the downtown assembly building, now under construction just north of the Salt Lake Temple. Tom Hansen, the church official in charge of the assembly-hall building project, was unavailable for comment.

The 21,000-seat hall is expected to open in April 2000. Plans also include a theater, gardens, skylights and multilevel parking.

According to Bill Marsh, director of the county's development services, the church does not plan to blast granite out of the hillside, only to rupture rocks that have tumbled onto church property. These smaller rocks would be carried down the canyon road on big trucks at the rate of three loads per day. The extraction is expected to start in April and be completed by December.

``There will be a lot of rock drilling and fugitive dust," says Tod Young of the Sierra Club. ``We don't know whether that risk has been mitigated."

Young worries that the operation could pollute nearby Little

Cottonwood Creek. Not to mention the geological impact. Once the boulders are removed, Young wonders, what is to keep the then-destabilized slopes from washing down into the canyon?

The most invasive part of the project, Marsh says, relates to the 600 feet of new road that would be carved to reach the fallen rocks. At 20 feet, the proposed width of the two roads is a matter of some concern to county planners.

Wildlife, however, is not.

"When you take the rocks out, the mountain goats will still be there," Marsh says. "At this point, wildlife is not a concern."

But goats are not the only ones to take a liking to the rock pile. Climbers find it a popular practice place.

Several years ago, church officials threatened to block access to the land. They were afraid of being sued if someone peeled off the cliff and died. This prompted discussions of a possible land trade with the U.S. Forest Service. According to Young, the negotiations have been going on for years.

County planner Susan Crook says that is an issue between the climbing community and the LDS Church. As for environmental concerns, a team of geologists and other experts will examine the impact before determining whether the project should go forward. Marsh expects to make a recommendation to the Planning Commission in two weeks.

That's too fast, critics say. Cunningham fears that planners are giving the church preferential treatment and rushing the approval process to accommodate its construction schedule. Neighbors only learned of the proposal a week ago, and environmentalists were alerted the day before a Tuesday public hearing before the Planning Commission.

Church officials have agreed to meet with residents next week to address their concerns, but Cunningham remains skeptical.

"We need more time to study all the issues," she says. "Once the church gets this permit, they can blast and haul for another 100 years."

Salt Lake Tribune reporter Jim Woolf contributed to this story.